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ABSTRACT

This summary paper examines factors in achieving full adult literacy in the United States, particularly among the growing population of limited-English-proficient (LEP) immigrants. The first section offers a demographic profile of LEP adults in this country, drawing largely on data from the National Adult Literacy Survey and on a study of poverty among Hispanics. Other characteristics of this population affecting delivery of literacy services are noted, with four kinds of barriers identified: institutional; situational; psychological; and pedagogical. The second section considers what policies and resources are necessary to ensure that every adult has the English language proficiency necessary to compete in a global economy, to be active citizens and community members, and to help their children start school ready to learn. A series of questions is posed to provoke thought in these general areas of concern: systematic rethinking of all services for LEP adults; enhancing LEP adults' employability, civic participation, and involvement in their children's education; resource allocation; and policy and legislative implications. A brief bibliography is included. (MSE) (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse on Literacy Education)

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NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR LITERACY

# WHAT KIND OF ADULT LITERACY POLICY WILL HELP ALL ADULTS DEVELOP THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERACY SKILLS THEY NEED TO PARTICIPATE FULLY IN AMERICAN LIFE?

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This summary paper was prepared by staff of the National Institute for Literacy to serve as a stimulus for discussion among participants at a policy forum on Achieving the National Education Goal on Adult Literacy to be held on June 23-24, 1994 at the Westin ANA Hotel in Washington,D.C. This forum is jointly sponsored by the National Institute for Literacy, the National Education Goals Panel and the National Governors Association.

The forum was conceived to engage policymakers, researchers, practitioners and citizens in serious and creative discussion of the ideas raised in a set of papers commissioned by the National Education Goals Panel and the National Institute for Literacy. In these papers researchers were asked to examine the significance of the findings of the National Adult Literacy Survey (NALS) for achieving critical national policy goals including the adult literacy and life long learning goal of the National Education Goals. A volume of the complete papers will be published in late 1994.

In preparing summary papers for this forum, NIFL staff have drawn on these commissioned papers and discussions with their authors. We have placed their research findings in a uniform framework that includes a series of key questions that will be addressed by forum participants.

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## WHAT KIND OF ADULT LITERACY POLICY WILL HELP ALL ADULTS DEVELOP THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERACY SKILLS THEY NEED TO PARTICIPATE FULLY IN AMERICAN LIFE?

### INTRODUCTION

In the past fifteen years the United States has experienced the largest wave of immigration since the beginning of this century. Forty-four percent of the 20 million foreign born persons living in America in 1990 entered the country between 1980 and 1990. This represents about 39% of the total national population increase for the decade.

The waves of immigration at the turn of the century brought Western and Eastern Europeans who shared a common cultural and racial heritage with the "founders" of the nation. But this latest wave of immigrants joined Native and African Americans in making our country look even more like a true microcosm of the world. It includes a 108% growth in the Asian and Pacific Islander populations and a 53% growth in the Hispanic population. While the numbers involved are small relative to the total U.S. population, the racial and ethnic diversity of these newcomers, and their geographic concentration in a few states, makes the new Americans stand out. Spanish speaking immigrants and refugees are especially visible -- and audible: at present the U.S. has the fourth largest Spanish-speaking population in the world. The visibility of Hispanic and Asian newcomers raises to a new level of intensity questions about culture and language and what it means to be an American.

As in past periods of high immigration, these new arrivals to the United States bring all their talents, skills and desires to make a good life here. They also create a challenge for the adult education system, because they arrive in an America where, no matter what their prior skills or training, a good job -- the key to a better life -- requires English language and, increasingly, English literacy skills. As a result, immigrants feel an urgency to gain those skills as quickly as possible. And in the ten states where they are concentrated, they swell the ranks of an adult basic education system that is clearly inadequate to meet their needs. Analysis of U.S. Department of Education adult basic education programs found that 97% of the adults currently in ESL services are foreign-born, and 50% have entered the country **since** 1990. Spanish-speaking adults account for 46% of these ESL learners, while Asians account for another 32%. Seventy percent of current ESL learners attend classes in the western United States; 90% are served in metropolitan areas in large programs serving over 1000 adults.

In a recent study supported by the Lila Wallace Foundation, the Southport Institute found that the ESL delivery system (which includes state and local funded programs, and refugee, welfare and job-training programs in addition to those supported by federal Adult Education Act dollars) is strong in meeting immediate, short-term survival needs but weak helping adults improve their skills to the point where they can take full advantage of the economic and social opportunities of American life. This finding has serious consequences for the major human resource and family policy issues addressed in this policy forum.

How can we build an adult education system that has the capacity to --

- o end welfare as we know it by enabling refugees and immigrants to develop the English language skills they need to assure self-sufficiency for their families?

- o assure that every child comes to school ready to learn by building the English language and literacy skills of non-English speaking parents?

- o prepare a work force with the flexibility to compete in a global economy by using the skills and talents -- including native language skills -- of all work-age adults, and building their skills and knowledge so that they can continually adapt to changes in the workplace and the world around them?

All of these goals require that new Americans increase their English language and literacy skills to the point where they **can** take full advantage of the economic and social opportunities of American life.

The purpose of this Policy Forum is to generate creative and thoughtful discussion among policymakers, practitioners, researchers and citizens about what we can do to assure that adults without English language and literacy proficiency develop the skills and knowledge necessary to compete in a global economy and exercise the rights and responsibilities of citizenship. While we are focusing separately on ESL issues today because of the unique challenges they pose, we are committed to developing integrated policies and programs for welfare reform and workforce development that are responsive to the needs of adults from all language and cultural backgrounds.

* * * * *

## I. WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT ADULTS WITH LIMITED ENGLISH PROFICIENCY?

### A. Linguistic Diversity in the U.S. Population

The 1990 Census reports that 25.5 million adults in the U.S. speak a language other than English. Of those, more than 5 million indicate they speak English "not well" or "not at all." The National Adult Literacy Survey (NALS) indicates that the number of speakers of other languages who have difficulties with English literacy is significantly higher than the Census figures. While 33% of legal immigrants come to the states with postsecondary education and training and advanced professional degrees, just as many have had only a few years of schooling in their home countries. These latter adults have not had the opportunity to develop strong literacy skills in their native languages.

Still others come from cultures where there are different cultural uses of literacy than in the United States. In these cultures, specific classes or groups, such as business people or religious leaders, may have strong literacy skills, while others, such as farmers and adult women, have no experience with reading or writing at all. Recent immigrants include the Hmong of Laos who do not rely on a written language at all.

Although many of these adults have acquired conversational skills in English, they often lack the reading and writing skills necessary for access to training, job mobility, or success in regular ESL classes.

**B. What the NALS tells us about Educational Attainment and Skills by Race and Ethnicity**

**Scores on NALS by Racial/Ethnic Identity and Country of Origin**

| Racial/ Ethnic Identity | U.S. born | Other Country |
|---|---|---|
| White adults | 287 | 258 |
| Asian/ Pacific Islander adults | 274 | 233 |
| Hispanic/Mexican | 247 | 158 |
| Black | 237 | 230 |
| Hispanic/Puerto Rican | 226 | 186 |
| Hispanic/Cuban | * | 202 |
| Hispanic/ Central or South American | 277 | 188 |
| Hispanic/ Other | 283 | 210 |

* The sample of Cuban adults who were born in the United States was too small to be reliable.

1. White adults scored significantly higher than every other racial and ethnic group on all scales of the NALS.

   - The average literacy proficiency for White adults on all three scales was 280 or above (Level III).

   - The average proficiency for Asians/Pacific Islanders on the NALS was 40 points below that of White adults on the prose and document literacy scales and 30 points below on the quantitative literacy scale. This puts them squarely in the middle of Level II.

   - The average proficiency for Black adults on all three scales ranged from a high of 237 on prose literacy to a low of 224 on the quantitative literacy scale (the bottom of Level II).

   - The average proficiency for Spanish-speaking adults of Mexican, Cuban, Puerto Rican and Central/South American origin Spanish-speaking adults was below 225 (Level I) on all three scales. Only for Cuban adults was there a difference between scores on the three scales, with Cubans mirroring the pattern of Asian/Pacific Islanders and scoring 10 points higher on quantitative literacy.

2. For every racial and ethnic group except Black adults, there is a significant difference between the scores of adults born in this country and those born in a foreign country, with adults born in this country scoring significantly higher.

3. The differential between scores based on country of origin can also be seen with regard to educational attainment. Groups that score higher on the NALS have higher rates of educational attainment. Hispanic adults in the NALS sample have the lowest average years of educational attainment (10 years). A National Council of La Raza Poverty Project report confirms that Hispanic women are especially likely to have low levels of educational attainment. Just over half of 25-29 year old Hispanic women have completed 12 or more years of school, compared to 90.5% of White women in the same age group.

4. The NALS data show a consistent and strong correlation -- regardless of race, ethnicity and gender -- between how well adults score on the three NALS scales and how well they are likely to do in the labor market. Those adults who score highest on the scales are most likely to have worked the most number of weeks in the preceding year, have the highest hourly and weekly wage and the highest household income. Conversely, those who score at the two lowest levels are the most likely to experience unemployment, employment at a low wage, and household income significantly below the poverty level.

**C. Other Demographic Factors**

Percent in Poverty:

1. A National Council of La Raza Poverty Project study reports that 29.3% of Hispanics live in poverty. This includes 20% of all Hispanic families and 50% of female-headed families. Forty % of all Hispanic children live in poverty.

2. Hispanic families of Puerto Rican origin are more likely than other Hispanic families to be poor. In 1991, 35.6% of Puerto Rican families lived in poverty, compared to 27.4% of Mexican American families, 24% of Central and South American families, and 13.9% of Cuban families.

3. Hispanics are more likely than other groups to be among the **working** poor: 20.9% of all Hispanic families below poverty had a head of household working full time year-round, compared to 17.3% of White families and 11.3% of Black families in poverty.

**D. Other Characteristics that Affect Service Delivery**

A rich source of data about characteristics that affect service delivery is provided by the ethnographic profiles of the uses of literacy and technology in the lives of low-literacy adults prepared by Hemphill and Merrifield for the Office of Technology Assessment's report on Adult Literacy and New Technologies: Tools for a Lifetime. Six non-native speakers of English -- from Ethiopia, Russia, China, Nicaragua, Mexico and Cambodia -- were included among those profiled. Participants were found to share the following: 1) isolation from the dominant culture amid a situation of intense multiculturalism -- an environment where English is requisite as a "lingua franca" with speakers of many other languages; 2) heavy reliance on

video technologies for information, entertainment and cultural preservation; 3) strong, persistent use of the native language/mother tongue in community and family contexts; 4) primacy of maintaining a sense of cultural community; 5) a structural relationship -- confirmed by the NALS -- between low-language/literacy skills of learners, their conditions of low-wage work and underemployment, and reliance of the local economy on their labor. (Hemphill)

Some of the barriers to literacy program participation that relate to these characteristics are summarized in a National Clearinghouse on Literacy Education (NCLE) Digest on Access to Literacy Education for Language Minority Adults. Four kinds of barriers are identified as limits to program participation for immigrants, especially immigrant women:

> Institutional barriers include lack of on-site child care by trusted members of the home culture, location of classes in unfamiliar institutions outside of local neighborhoods, and course schedules that conflict with family responsibilities.
>
> Situational barriers include lack of safe or convenient transportation to and from classes, conflicting commitments to part-time work, unfamiliarity with institutional practices and government services, and responsibilities to children or extended family members.
>
> Psychosocial barriers appear in traditional attitudes of family members or community leaders, which may restrict women from being educated beyond initial schooling or from seeking employment that conflicts with family responsibilities or conventional roles.
>
> Pedagogical barriers include instructional materials and lessons that do not have immediate relevance to women's personal situations, appear too "bookish" or impractical to be of immediate benefit, or threaten cultural values or roles.

While these kinds of barriers can confront adults of any group and certainly need to be taken into consideration when designing all adult services, they can be especially salient when designing programs for adults who are recent arrivals from countries with different cultural values, attitudes, and practices than ours.

* * * * *

"The extent to which immigrant adults are considered resourceful and educated by program staff depends on the level of support they receive from social networks -- family, friends and community groups. Those adults who are part of established immigrant communities tend to fare much better than those who do not share the language and cultural background of their neighbors. When cut off from social support, adults who do not have the English language and literacy skills needed to access services and voice their needs often face difficult challenges."

-- Heide Spruck Wrigley

* * * * *

## II. WHAT POLICIES AND RESOURCES ARE NECESSARY TO ENSURE THAT EVERY ADULT HAS THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY NECESSARY TO COMPETE IN A GLOBAL ECONOMY, BE ACTIVE CITIZENS AND COMMUNITY MEMBERS, AND HELP THEIR CHILDREN START SCHOOL READY TO LEARN?

### A. Rethinking the System

The Southport Institute report calls for a systematic rethinking of all services for adults with limited English language and literacy proficiency (LEP). How can we be sure that the needs of LEP adults are taken into account when designing services aimed at --

- facilitating the welfare-to-work transition,
- enhancing employability and upgrading the skills of workers,
- getting children ready for school, and
- building the skills and knowledge necessary for civic participation?

The concept of an "adult mobility continuum" is one way for us to think about how adult needs for education and training change over a lifetime. Meeting those needs at any given point in an adult's life leads to enhanced mobility through moving on to a new or better job in response to changes in the economy, the community or their own situation. In Oregon, the continuum looks like this:

| Adult Mobility Continuum | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Most Restricted Mobility | Somewhat Restricted Mobility | Average Mobility | Above Average Mobility | Most Flexible Workforce in the World |
| | | | | |

a. How can this concept help us in thinking about a system to meet the diverse needs of LEP adults?

b. How can we place and define various LEP population groups on this continuum?

c. How might we define optimal services at differing points on the continuum for (1) welfare recipients; 2) working adults; 3) parents of pre-school and school-age children?

**B. Enhancing LEP adults' employability, civic participation, and involvement in their children's education:**

1. Do we need special performance standards for welfare-to-work and other employability programs for limited English proficient adults?

2. What measures should we use for learner progress and success for welfare-to-work programs? for skills enhancement programs for those already working? For community and parent involvement?

   a. What skills, knowledge and abilities are important to develop and measure?

   b. Are there assessment approaches available to assess literacy levels and measure progress in these areas for adults at every level of literacy development?

   c. What stakeholders should be involved in setting these standards?

3. What do we know about effective service delivery strategies to achieve these goals

   a. for LEP adults on welfare?
   b. for LEP adults already in the workforce?

4. How do these strategies differ from strategies for native English speaking adults?

5. What do we know about the impact of learning disabilities that can help us structure programs more effectively to meet the needs of LEP adults with learning disabilities?

6. What recommendations should we make about program quality for LEP adults?

   a. what variables do we need to take into account in defining program quality?

   b. do we know enough about what works to endorse a particular approach to service delivery?

7. What kind of staff development do we need to assure that welfare caseworkers, education providers, job developers and other key individuals providing services to LEP adults are best able to facilitate achievement of established goals?

**C. Targeting and Resources**

1. Given constrained state and federal budgets, how do we make best use of the resources available for the education and training of LEP adults?

a. what strategies exist for effectively targeting existing basic education resources from all sources?

b. Does it make sense to target a specific group or groups for service? Who are the likely candidates? What are the pluses and minuses of this strategy?

c. Should we target specific geographic regions?

d. What are the trade-offs between serving a large number of participants with less intensive services and serving a smaller number with higher-cost, intensive services more likely to increase participants' earning potential?

e. What new approaches to service delivery might enable us to expand program capacity without large infusions of funding? Eg. can we use technology to expand the traditional classroom to include the neighborhood and the community? Can we deliver functional competency-based learning into homes, enabling us to overcome costs and constraints like child care and transportation?

2. What resources and partnerships will enable us to address other needs that are part of assuring that LEP adults can participate in basic skills instruction?

3. What other resources are available for meeting education and training needs?

a. What kind of partnerships with employers can assure that learning and skill development continue once people find employment?

b. What legislative and other strategies might provide incentives to the private sector to support job specific education and training on the job?

**E. What are the policy and legislative implications of these recommendations?**

1. How do these recommendations affect proposals for Welfare Reform? for the Reemployment Act?

2. What impact do these proposals have in preparing for reauthorization of the Adult Education Act?

3. Are there other legislative or administrative actions that might be affected by these proposals?

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